Standards for Special Education

< Amended June 2004 >

Essential Components

OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING

for

Students
who are
Blind or
Visually
Impaired

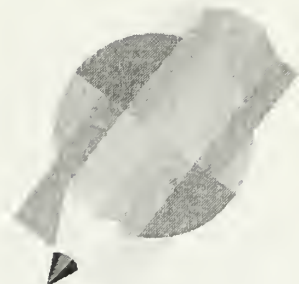APPROPRIATENESS

Alberta
LEARNING

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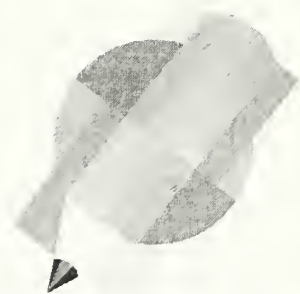
Foreword

The *Essential Components of Educational Programming for Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired (Essential Components)* was developed for parents, classroom teachers, resource personnel and administrators who provide programming for these students. Careful planning, preparation and team work produce effective and appropriate programming for students who are blind or visually impaired.

The essential components of educational programming and their indicators described in this resource are based on research and best practices in the education of students who are blind or visually impaired. Achieving the indicators described in this document may be affected by practical constraints and the availability of resources.

Purpose

The intended purposes of this document are to:
* provide indicators of effective programming
* establish a common understanding of the terminology associated with this specialized field
* provide guidelines for the staff and parent roles related to educational programming for these students.

Links to *Standards for Special Education, Amended 2004*

Standards for Special Education, Amended 2004 requires school boards to identify and deliver programming for students with special needs in grades 1–12 in an effective manner. These standards promote a consistent, high quality educational practice within Alberta.

This document is directly linked to the appropriateness component of *Standards for Special Education, Amended 2004* and the requirements relating to professional standards, individualized program planning, implementation and evaluation, and parent involvement in decision-making. According to *Standards for Special Education*, Amended *2004*, appropriateness means *"educational programs and services are designed around the assessed needs of the student and provided by qualified staff who are knowledgeable and skilled"* (p. 2).

Guiding Principles

* Students who are blind or visually impaired need to participate in the regular curriculum to the fullest extent possible.
* Students who are visually impaired have different needs than those who are blind.
* Programming must be based on an individual student's needs.
* Programming is an ongoing process, which is monitored and adjusted to meet a student's needs.
* The essential components of educational programming are not discrete; they are processes that work together.

- Students who are visually impaired have access to materials, instruction and services provided by specialized teachers, as do students who are blind.
- In the absence of other disabilities, students are expected to perform at a level consistent with provincial standards.

The Students and Their Unique Educational Needs

Students described as blind or visually impaired have diverse needs with a common trait of some degree of vision loss. Any student who has limited access to visual information will experience difficulties in any number of daily activities. From an educational perspective, the degree of vision loss is only one of several aspects for consideration in assessment and program planning. These students also display differing characteristics, such as varying cognitive abilities, level of independence, physical agility, severity of disability and presence of additional disabilities.

Because visual impairment and blindness are low-incidence disabilities, a student with vision loss may be the only student with this disability in his or her school or community. Intervention for students who are blind or visually impaired is based on the degree to which they can access, incorporate and respond to the sensory information.

Without vision, students cannot access information beyond those things that they can touch. Without this information, students are unable to organize their environment or develop concepts that are important in understanding connections in their world. Students who are blind or visually impaired need to access this information through direct experiences and hands-on, tactile exploration facilitated by qualified professionals who can address these unique needs.

Accessing the program of studies is often challenging for students with visual impairment or blindness. In order to participate fully within the educational environment, these students require instruction from a trained professional in disability-specific skills, such as:
- braille literacy skills
- assistive technology skills
- use of low-vision devices
- career and life management skills
- social interaction skills
- independent living and personal management skills
- orientation and mobility skills.

Incorporating the teaching of these skills into a student's program expands the concept of core curriculum. This process and the description of the above skills is referred to as the Expanded Core Curriculum (Appendix A).

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

1. Learning Teams

All students who are blind or visually impaired should have learning teams who work together to plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate programming and services.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- Members of the learning team include classroom teachers, parents, administrators, teachers trained in educating students who are blind or visually impaired (specialized teachers), orientation and mobility instructors (O&M), other professionals involved with assessment and/or programming, and, when appropriate, students. The teacher must direct and lead the learning team in developing goals and objectives that are educationally relevant.
- Additional members are added to the learning team as needed. These may include professionals such as occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, physiotherapists, school psychologists, behaviour specialists, career counselors, adapted physical education specialists, nurses, social workers or assistive technology consultants.
- The roles and responsibilities of learning team members are clearly identified in the students' Individualized Program Plans (IPPs).
- The learning team develops goals and objectives for the students' IPPs at the beginning of each school year. Progress is routinely monitored and evaluated. Changes to IPPs are made in response to student progress during the academic year.

2. Meaningful Parent and Family Involvement

Parents, as members of the learning team, should be involved, valued and believe their contributions are meaningful.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- Parents contribute to the identification of goals and objectives incorporated in their children's IPPs.
- The family has the opportunity to access the information that the learning team acquires specific to the impact of vision loss and the acquisition of disability-specific skills.
- The family receives information about opportunities to access training that would assist them in monitoring and facilitating the utilization of disability-specific skills in the home and community.

3. Disability-specific Skills

The outcomes of education identified for all students are appropriate for students with visual impairments if they receive instruction in disability-specific skills.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- Specialized teachers identify programming needs through assessment, educate teams about the impact of visual impairment or blindness on learning and development, set appropriate expectations for progress and performance, provide strategies to address assessed learning needs, and provide direct instruction in disability-specific skill areas, also known as the Expanded Core Curriculum.

- Orientation and Mobility (O&M) instruction is an integral part of the Expanded Core Curriculum. Students should receive O&M training from qualified professionals (specialized teachers or qualified O&M instructors) who work with the teacher to integrate their instruction into the educational environment. O&M instruction teaches students concepts about how the environment is structured and organized (for example, where room numbers are typically located), and how to move safely from one place to another both in and out of school. Together, the O&M instructor and the teacher incorporate this information into the students' IPPs taking into account daily routines in the home, school and community environments.
- Professionals and paraprofessionals working with students who are blind or visually impaired have opportunities to access professional development to ensure they stay abreast of new programming and research information.
- The level of service that students receive from a specialized teacher is directly related to the needs of students, direct instruction required for each student and the teacher's job assignment and workload.

4. Assessment

Programming and services should be determined through assessments conducted by a specialized teacher and other professionals identified by the learning team.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- Specialized teachers and O&M instructors routinely assess students who are blind or visually impaired in all areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum.
- Students receive assessments that identify their optimal means of access to visual information prior to the start of formal reading and writing instruction (functional vision assessment). The learning team is established to design, implement and evaluate students' IPPs, and to examine and analyze assessment results to make informed decisions of the materials and strategies to be used.
- Assessment is ongoing and decisions are re-evaluated on a yearly basis, or more frequently if decisions are tentative or problems arise.
- Students participate in the same academic assessments as their classmates, including Provincial Achievement Tests and Diploma Examinations.
- Students with additional disabilities receive assessments from qualified professionals identified by the learning team.

5. Individualized Program Plans (IPPs)

Learning teams should develop IPPs that include components of the Expanded Core Curriculum. IPPs become working documents for learning teams to use throughout the year.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- IPPs are a collaborative effort with all members of the learning team participating.
- Learning teams gather information from assessment pertinent to the development of students' IPPs. The learning team uses this information to develop IPPs that meet the needs of students.
- Essential information on the IPP includes:
  - assessment data
  - relevant medical information
  - current level of performance and achievement

- – measurable goals and objectives
- – procedures for evaluating student progress
- – identification of coordinated support services
- – required classroom accommodations
- – transition plans
- – year-end summary.
- Students' IPPs include goals and objectives specific to their unique learning needs, the Expanded Core Curriculum, modifications or accommodations necessary to ensure access to the regular curriculum, and/or individualized programming necessary to address other disability-specific needs.
- Students who use braille receive regular braille literacy instruction from specialized teachers as they are acquiring literacy skills, particularly in the first four years of school. In those areas where a braille teacher is not available the school should look at alternate ways to access this service, such as video-conferencing.

6. Access to Programs and Services

All students who are blind or visually impaired, regardless of the presence and severity of additional disabilities, should have equal access to the programming and services provided by specialized teachers and O&M instructors.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- Specialized teachers and O&M instructors are contributing members of the learning team for students who are blind or visually impaired.
- Student goals and objectives addressing areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum are integrated within students' individualized programs and daily routines.
- Specialized teachers provide consultation to parents and educators as well as direct instruction in areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum when deemed appropriate by members of the learning team.

7. Accessibility of Alternate Format Materials

Members of the learning team should identify alternate format materials for students. These materials should be provided at the same time as print materials are made available to sighted peers. Students should have the opportunity to request materials in the format of their choice.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- Students receive materials in their required alternate format for library collections, Alberta Learning approved curriculum materials, teacher-prepared materials, leisure reading, school notices/announcements and report cards.
- The production and distribution of materials in alternate format are coordinated by the Materials Resource Centre to ensure efficient access.
- Students receive materials in alternate format at the same time as classmates receive materials.

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8. Assistive Technology

Assistive technology such as braille note-taking devices or language masters (computerized dictionary) should be made available for use in school. An appropriate level of technical support enhances students' ability to access assistive technology and incorporate its use in everyday activities.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- The learning team includes individuals with expertise in assistive technology to provide consultation and/or assessment relevant to student use of assistive technology.
- Comprehensive assistive technology assessments are completed to determine needs of students.
- Specialized teachers, classroom teachers and parents receive information and training in the use of assigned assistive technology to ensure students have support to master its use.
- Students receive the appropriate version of assigned assistive technology or software to ensure the maximum level of access.
- Students are using assistive technology to move them towards independence in the school and community environments.

9. Programming Options

Students should have a full array of programming options, including short-term intensive training opportunities, to address areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- Students have opportunities to access short-term intensive training options, particularly in areas of the Expanded Core Curriculum (for example, learning how to use the internet, using voice-access technology and applying their O&M skills to navigate through their community).
- Program placement decisions are based on the assessed needs of students, the recommendations of school-based planning teams and input from parents.

10. Comprehensive Transition Planning

Comprehensive transition planning should occur on an ongoing basis, identifying and developing skills that students require as they move to different learning environments.

Indicators of Effective Programming
- Transition planning teams comprised of parents, specialized teachers, O&M instructors, educators, representatives from other organizations involved with students (for example, Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) personnel), and students where appropriate, meet to plan students' new placements.
- Students' transition plans include information pertinent to the skills necessary to succeed in new environments (for example, O&M, independent living skills, as well as scholarships, and supported work personnel).
- Students are prepared for transitions to new environments.
- Transition planning goals are ongoing and proactive as well as being outlined and completed prior to placement.

APPENDIX A

Expanded Core Curriculum

In order to participate fully within the educational environment, students who are blind or visually impaired require instruction in disability-specific skills. These disability-specific skills are known as the Expanded Core Curriculum when they are incorporated into program planning. These disability-specific skills are described below.

Compensatory or Functional Academic Skills

These are skills needed to access the regular curriculum presented in the regular classroom (compensatory skills), skills needed by students with multiple disabilities to enhance their ability to participate in home, school and community (functional skills), and an array of communication skills.

> *"Communication needs of students with visual impairments will vary depending on the degree of functional vision, the effects of additional disabilities and the task to be done. Students may communicate through braille, large print, print with the use of optical aids, regular print, tactile books, a calendar system, sign language, recorded materials or combinations of these means."* (Hatlen, 1996)

Examples of other compensatory or functional academic skill areas include concept development, spatial awareness, keyboarding skills, listening skills, organizational skills, use of the abacus and tactile discrimination skills. The everyday concepts and practical knowledge usually acquired through incidental learning by students who are sighted, require specific instruction for students who are blind or visually impaired to ensure they are building their knowledge base on accurate information.

Orientation and Mobility

This is an area of instruction focusing on students' ability to know where they are in relation to their environment and to travel safely, efficiently, purposefully and independently throughout this environment. Effective orientation and mobility skills are highly correlated with the degree of independence achieved by students later in life. Developing body awareness, directionality, spatial awareness and practical knowledge associated with the characteristics of a given environment increases the probability that students will be actively involved in age-appropriate activities with peers. Problem-solving strategies essential to travel in both familiar and unfamiliar environments, urban and rural areas, and in various kinds of weather are essential to the development of independence and self-esteem. Students who have low vision need to learn to interpret both visual and auditory information, and may require optical devices to access information. White canes are essential for some students who cannot rely on the accuracy of the visual information they receive. Students who are blind or visually impaired with additional disabilities require orientation and mobility instruction that addresses the specific needs of their daily routines. Orientation and mobility is taught by professionals who have completed certified programs in this specialized area.

Social Interaction Skills

These skills are essential if students are to develop friendships with their classmates and participate in activities typically associated with school-age students, whether educational or extracurricular. Having effective interpersonal communication skills is also highly correlated with employability in adults. For students who are sighted, social skills are primarily learned

incidentally through interaction with family members and peers. Most of this learning occurs through observation, imitation and incidental experiences that are part of everyday routines. For students who are blind or visually impaired, this information must be provided through timely, insightful and sequential instruction. Information associated with non-verbal communication (e.g., gestures, body language, facial expressions, cultural practices, or how close to stand to the person with whom you are speaking) must be made available to students who are blind or visually impaired. Furthermore, peers of students who are blind or visually impaired require specific instruction to increase their awareness of the implications of vision loss on social interaction if they are to become both comfortable in their interactions with their classmate who is blind or visually impaired and knowledgeable about how to include this student.

Independent Living Skills and Personal Management Skills
These skills are highly correlated with the achievement of lifelong goals for students who are blind or visually impaired.

> *"This area encompasses all the tasks and functions people perform, according to their abilities, in order to live as independently as possible."* (Hatlen, 1996)

Curriculum designed to address the development of independent living skills includes instruction in such areas as personal hygiene, food preparation, money and time management, home management, and organization of personal belongings and space to accommodate the lack of visual input. While similar skills may be taught within the curriculum, they do not provide sufficient opportunity for the meaningful and frequent practice required for students who are blind or visually impaired. The regular curriculum often assumes a basic level of knowledge acquired incidentally through vision. Students who are blind or visually impaired cannot learn these skills without direct, sequential instruction by knowledgeable people.

Recreation and Leisure Skills
These skills and experiences provide the same benefits for students who are blind or visually impaired as they do for their peers who are sighted; e.g., healthy lifestyle, fitness, shared peer interests. However, without modifications and/or specific instruction to master prerequisite skills, students who are blind or visually impaired are frequently excluded from such activities. Many of the motor skills learned during the rough and tumble play of childhood activities do not develop naturally in students who are blind or visually impaired. If initial exposure to specific activities is awkward or their level of participation or success below that of their peers, students who are blind or visually impaired may become easily discouraged. The provision of specific, timely instruction and opportunities to practise newly acquired skills ensures students derive pleasure from participation in an array of recreational and leisure activities.

Career and Life Management Skills
These skills prepare students for the world of work. There are many additional program components which need to be addressed for students who are blind or visually impaired; e.g., accommodations required to complete specific jobs, access to appropriate assistive technology, self-advocacy skills, and skills to deal effectively with negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Frequently, students who are blind or visually impaired are unaware of the array of possible career options because adults around them are uninformed. Employment statistics from Canada and the United States indicate that individuals who are blind or visually impaired are both underemployed and have unacceptably high rates of unemployment. Without specific and timely intervention to address career development issues, students who are blind or visually impaired encounter significant barriers to successful employment.

Assistive Technology

This technology enables students to access information, participate in age-appropriate activities and complete tasks independently or with minimal assistance. The term "assistive technology" refers to a broad range of devices, such as video magnifiers (e.g., closed circuit televisions), low-vision devices, computers with braille input/output, braille embossers, software used to vary print size, large screen monitors, talking calculators. Instruction in the use of assistive technology begins in the preschool years and evolves as the needs of students change. Mastery of assistive technology contributes to the development of literacy and academic success, social interaction among peers, independence and the potential of future employment.

Visual Efficiency Skills

These skills are used to accurately interpret visual information and complete visual tasks as efficiently and effectively as possible. Students' ability to interpret visual information is affected by many variables; e.g., the type and severity of vision loss, cognitive ability, experiential knowledge and environmental factors, such as lighting. However, with comprehensive, systematic training and practice, most students can learn to use their remaining vision more effectively and efficiently. Visual efficiency training may include blur interpretation, scanning and location skills, strategies to improve visual efficiency; e.g., use of appropriate lighting or wearing tinted lenses to reduce glare; and strategies that enhance a given student's access to visual information. Students learn about their particular eye condition, its implications on access to visual information, and how to explain their visual needs to others.

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Braille is a code that presents written information. It is equivalent to print. The alphabet, numbers, music notation, and any other symbol that appears in print can be replicated in braille by arranging combinations of the six dots of the braille "cell". Braille is read by touch, usually using the first finger on one or both hands.

Compensatory skills are skills needed to access the regular curriculum presented in the regular classroom (compensatory skills); skills needed by students with multiple disabilities to enhance their ability to participate in home, school and community (functional skills); and an array of communication skills. Examples of other compensatory or functional academic skill areas include concept development, spatial awareness, keyboarding skills, listening skills, organizational skills, use of the abacus and tactile discrimination skills.

Expanded Core Curriculum is a disability-specific curriculum that identifies skills in the following areas: braille literacy, assistive technology, career and life management, social interaction, independent living, orientation and mobility, recreation and leisure, visual efficiency, and personal management.

Orientation and mobility (O&M) is an area of instruction focusing on students' ability to know where they are in relation to their environment and to travel safely, efficiently, purposefully and independently throughout this environment. Developing body awareness, directionality, spatial awareness and practical knowledge associated with the characteristics of a given environment are examples of orientation and mobility skills.

Specialized teacher is a qualified teacher who has additional training in the area of teaching students with visual impairments or blindness.

Visually impaired – any degree of vision loss that interferes with accessing visual information.

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